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“NO JOBS ON A DEAD PLANET”: ENERGY DEMOCRACY, PUBLIC OWNERSHIP AND UNION OPPOSITION TO MEGA-ENERGY PROJECTS

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‘Energy democracy’ has emerged as a central concept in left debates over climate change and energy transition. An exploration of its provenance and potential, centred on the challenge posed by energy democracy to older varieties of ‘jobs-first’ trade-unionism.

For more than a decade, climate justice activists have attempted to reframe climate change and ecological crisis not just as an 'environmental' concern but as a serious political issue. In order to rethink energy transitions the movement has put forward the concept of 'energy democracy', which has become an important demand for a variety of actors across the world. At its core, energy democracy expresses the need for more ecologically sustainable, democratically accountable, and socially just energy futures. As a growing global movement, energy democracy actively politicises energy and energy transitions, and has the potential to unite various actors and stakeholders. Past projects and initiatives have, for example, brought together environmentalists and green advocates; labour organisations and trade unions; climate and environmental justice activists; local and regional government actors; citizens' and neighbourhood groups, and religious organisations and churches. The idea of energy democracy appeals to broad-based coalitions because it does not have a single, strictly-defined vision of the future. Based around the core demand for sustainable, democratic and just energy futures, different groups have used various narratives to achieve their vision(s), such as advocating for the public ownership of the energy system through the remunicipalisation of utilities, increased regional governance of energy, decentralised and cooperative ownership, or a centralised, publicly-controlled energy system. Energy democracy has also found its way into labour movement discourses, and is increasingly popular in debates concerning public ownership.

This article explores recent discussions about energy democracy and public ownership in the trade union movement. After providing a brief overview of past labour environmentalist initiatives and ideas, the article introduces the global labour network Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED), which was established to advance a concept of energy democracy with a specific emphasis on the experiences of workers. Drawing on recent tensions within the US labour movement over mega-pipeline projects, the article explores some of the motivations of unions in the health care and transport sectors to support a broader alliance of indigenous groups, environmentalists, ranchers and farmers on the frontlines of the anti-Keystone XL struggle.

A Brief History of Trade-Union Environmentalism

The narrative of ‘jobs versus the environment’ is often used to suggest that the labour movement is naturally hostile to environmentalism. In fact, there have been labour environmentalist ideas and initiatives for some time. Since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, unions and labour organisations have been recognised as official stakeholders in United Nations-level governance of climate change and sustainable development. For the most part, however, labour remained a rather passive actor in the UN process. At least until the early 2000s, its input was mainly limited to workplace health and safety debates as well as workplace action. The labour movement’s involvement

changed in the mid-2000s, when narratives of green growth, green jobs and clean infrastructure became widely adopted at the United Nations, as well as in many national governmental discourses in the global North. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), founded in 2006, was heavily influenced by the emergent 'green' discourse in the trade union movement. The ITUC was involved in a large-scale partnership called the 'Green Jobs Initiative' alongside United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the International Organisation of Employers (IOE). The initiative emphasised green employment opportunities as well as education and training for trade unionists on issues such as energy transition and climate change, while supporting the green growth discourses of the UN.

The financial crisis of 2008 dampened green growth enthusiasm. Financial investments and government commitments to green jobs and infrastructure slowed. Earlier narrative of an inevitable transition to a green economy increasingly appeared to be unrealistic. Shifting priorities to 'saving' the economy and bailing out banks meant that previously-agreed emission reduction commitments were not met, and policy tools pushed by the UN—such as emission trading markets—failed to have a significant impact.

Against this backdrop, trade unions became increasingly aware that there was no distinct and coherent narrative on environmental issues from the labour movement itself. The main arguments from the labour movement had been centred around the creation of green jobs and were closely tied to the dominant 'green growth' agenda of the UN and many governments. One of the first trade union movement bodies developing an alternative solution to environmental challenges was the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), the global union federation for transport sector workers. A report by the ITF's Climate Change Working Group from 2010 links the sector's contribution to emissions and climate change to the political challenge of making meaningful changes to transport. The report offers a "Reduce – Shift – Improve"¹ framework as a solution towards a sustainable and low-carbon mobility concept, and embeds the framework in existing ITF policy.

"Resist! Reclaim! Restructure!": Trade Unions for Energy Democracy

The emergence of the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) network coincides with a growing awareness among some parts of the labour movement that the previous politics of green growth and clean jobs cannot deliver a just energy transition. The TUED network is a global, multi-sector trade union initiative, which campaigns for the democratic control and social (and public) ownership of energy resources, infrastructure and options. Launched in early 2013, TUED was founded following a trade union roundtable held in New York the previous year. The discussion document of the roundtable, "Resist, Reclaim, Restructure: Unions and the Struggle for Energy Democracy", was subsequently adopted as TUED's founding statement. Five years on, TUED has established itself as a global network and currently consists of over 60 unions and allied policy and social movement organisations from 22 countries. Individual unions from across all sectors are represented in the initiative, as are regional organisations, national union centres, and four global union federations representing educators, food workers, the transport sector and public services.

TUED promotes an independent and internationalist trade union approach to energy transitions which aims to provide labour with a well-informed leftist position on climate change and energy issues. Their version of energy democracy is expressed in the "Resist! Reclaim! Restructure!" framework, which stands for:

the need to *resist* the dominant agenda of the large energy corporations and their allies; the need to *reclaim* to the public sphere parts of the energy economy that have been privatized or marketized; and the need to *restructure* the global energy system in order to massively scale up renewable and low-carbon energy, aggressively implement energy conservation, ensure job-creation and local wealth creation, and assert community and democratic control over the energy sector.²

The call to “Resist! Reclaim! Restructure!” provides a unifying bracket for the nationally- and sectorally-diverse membership of the TUED network. However, while 22 countries are represented, most participating unions are based in the English-speaking global North; 34 out of the 62 participating unions are from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand alone. The TUED network represents unions across all sectors but active participation is strongest from unions in the transport, public, and health care sectors.

Some of the most involved unions are representing transport and public services workers such as UK's UNISON and PCS (Public and Commercial Services Union), Norway's NUMGE (Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees), Canada's CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees), and Korea's KTPU (Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union). Nursing and health care professionals are also involved, most notably in the United States through the NNU (National Nurses United), NYSNA (New York State Nurses Association), and 1199SEIU (Service Employees International Union - United Healthcare Workers East). Other notably active union bodies are South Africa's NUMSA (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa), Australia's ETU (Electrical Trades Union), as well as the Philippine's SENTRO (an alliance for progressive labour), Italy's national union federation CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas, and the global union federation ITF (International Transport Workers' Federation).

TUED's call to resist, reclaim, and restructure the global energy system is radical and novel. It rejects and challenge the dominant arguments for green growth and question the promise that greening the current economy through investments in 'green' jobs and clean infrastructure will lead to meaningful action on climate change. Based on a critical analysis of current energy trends, TUED argue that renewable energy generation is not growing fast enough under a green growth agenda in order to make a real difference to emission reductions and climate action. The network argues that the green growth ideas put forward by the UN and many governments still ultimately support the current energy system, which is geared towards generating huge profits for multinational energy corporations at the cost of the environment alongside human and non-human health and well-being. TUED believes that the current profit-driven energy system will never be compatible with a socially just and ecologically sustainable energy future. The TUED network thus exposes 'green' growth as a false solution, and criticises the continued capitalist approach of the UN, whose annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs), the governing body of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), continues to support and promote green growth strategies. Last year's COP23 took place in Bonn, Germany, under the presidency of Fiji, a small island state that already experiences the harsh realities of climate change. Fiji's presidency initially promised to advance discussions on climate justice, equitable climate finance, and “common but differentiated responsibility” between states. However, COP23 quickly returned to business as usual as the parties continued to advocate for market-driven measures such as the Clean Development Mechanism to facilitate climate adaptation in the global South.

Opposed to green growth, TUED advocate for public ownership and democratic control of energy systems as an alternative solution to the climate crisis. It envisions a decisive shift of power from the corporations to the public, which will allow for people and communities, not profits, to guide and govern the transition. A planned transition to public ownership means that workers in affected sectors can be protected and new, decent and environmentally-friendly jobs created. However, while the realisation of energy democracy in the form of building new public ownership structures in the energy sector has a lot of potential, it is also far from being clearly defined. As TUED represents a nationally and sectorally-diverse membership, the network does not prescribe a 'best-practice' model of public ownership and instead focusses on providing unions with facts and information to ultimately form their own policies.

“No Jobs on a Dead Planet”: US Unions and the Mega-Pipeline Disputes

While the TUED network has seen significant growth over the past five years and has established itself as a progressive trade union body, the arguments that TUED puts forward are far from universally accepted in the wider trade union movement. In the US, tensions over energy and climate politics between unions in different sectors have especially come to the fore around mega-projects such as the Keystone XL and, more recently, the Dakota Access Pipelines. Both projects attracted huge opposition from indigenous groups, ranchers and farmers, environmental and climate justice groups and local residents. Yet unions representing workers in the building trades continuously lobbied for the mega-projects to go ahead. Reinforcing the 'jobs versus the environment' debate, the US construction unions denounced other unions—and their environmental and social movement allies—as “job killers”³. However, the building trades were not the only labour movement voice speaking out on this issue. Some of TUED's most involved unions are representing workers in the US health care sector, especially the national nursing union NNU (National Nurses United) and the regional New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA), who have been instrumental in the anti-pipeline protests. NNU and NYSNA have supported their allies and coalition partners on the frontlines of these struggles, deconstructing the 'jobs versus environment' debate as a false dichotomy. While recognising that good jobs are needed across the country, unions in opposition to energy mega-projects have argued that those jobs would not be created by the mega-pipelines. These will instead lock the US into decades of fossil fuel use that is damaging to people, communities, and environments.

As first responders, health care workers see first-hand the impacts of climate change and extreme weather in their communities. NYSNA nurses, for example, cared for affected communities during and after the 2012 Super Storm Sandy, which wreaked havoc across the Greater Antilles and the entire Eastern seaboard of the United States and Canada. In the US, over 100 people lost their lives, and 650,000 homes were damaged or destroyed in the states of New York and New Jersey alone. Hospitals had to be evacuated, the New York City subway was flooded, power outages were widespread, and the New York Stock Exchange closed for two days. As first responders in communities that were particularly hard-hit and difficult to access by emergency units, nurses proved instrumental. Next to extreme weather events, nurses and other health care providers also experience the impacts of fossil fuel extraction and use on a daily basis. The experiences are many and varied: from treating children suffering asthma as a result of being exposed to above-average air pollution from expressways in the South Bronx, New York City; to caring for patients with skin, eye and throat irritation who work in and live next to hydraulic fracking

sites; or facing public health crises such as the water contamination in Flint, Michigan, which left residents with myriad physical and psychological conditions.

These first-hand experiences have built support for anti-climate change and fossil fuel politics among health care unions and their workers. While other unions, such as the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) have also been instrumental in the anti-Keystone XL struggle, health care workers are in a unique position because the rank-and-file are already aware of these issues. NYSNA, the New York City nursing union, has used its members' everyday experiences of health impacts to politicise energy and climate issues in the workplace through a lunchtime education programme called "Lunch & Learn". Union members are invited to a free lunch and a short, visual slideshow, which builds on their lived experience of patient and community (ill)health, and subsequently links health issues to wider social and political structures. The common thread through many of the experiences of ill-health described above are the social and economic inequalities faced by patients and communities. The communities suffering most from pollution as well as extreme weather are also among the poorest and most disenfranchised in the US.

Far from wanting to 'kill jobs', TUED unions want to create better and more secure employment opportunities, which benefit workers, communities and ecosystems. In their opposition to Keystone XL, the transport unions TWU and ATU convincingly state:

We need jobs, but not ones based on increasing our reliance on Tar Sands oil. There is no shortage of water and sewage pipelines that need to be fixed or replaced, bridges and tunnels that are in need of emergency repair, transportation infrastructure that needs to be renewed and developed. Many jobs could also be created in energy conservation, upgrading the grid, maintaining and expanding public transportation—jobs that can help us reduce air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and improve energy efficiency.⁴

It could be argued that some of the most involved unions, who participate in mega-pipeline protests by advocating for energy democracy and public ownership, such as nurses, transport workers and public sector employees, will all benefit from a stronger public sector and thus share an interest in a transition to a public energy system. However, this would do grave injustice to their activism and political successes. The unions' involvements in these struggles go beyond their sectoral interest and industrial policies, and are powerful expressions of solidarity with affected communities, indigenous groups, workers, patients, service users, as well as the environment itself.

Conclusions

Energy democracy and public ownership make for convincing arguments for a new, left politics on climate change and energy issues for the trade union movement and beyond. Energy democracy can contribute to building a more socially just, sustainable and democratic future for all – workers, communities, as well as ecosystems. While a growing numbers of actors and stakeholders see the potential of democratising energy, tensions and challenges remain within and between movements, as well as around education, communication and training on energy and climate issues. Such tensions have become especially apparent in the US, where unions are divided over pipeline mega-projects and energy policy, but will also come to the fore in other countries and contexts around the future energy mix as well as the type and scale of a public ownership system. Such

questions will for example address the methods of energy generation and infrastructure, such as the feasibility of hydraulic fracking, the development of smart grids, or the desirability of off-shore wind farms. Questions around public ownership will most likely focus on how different models, such as cooperative, municipal, and state ownership, will be incorporated effectively. The TUED network and its unions have strong arguments for a democratic and socially just energy future and have been active in socio-ecological justice struggles across the world. Yet both the US and global labour movement are facing long and intense debates around energy and climate change. Even within the TUED network, unions are not always in agreement over the particularities of a future energy transition or specific forms of a public ownership system. At this point it is vital for the labour movement to embrace those debates, educate itself, and ultimately enable workers and communities to make well-informed decisions about their energy futures.

In order to meaningfully participate in these discussions, unions and labour organisations need to be well-informed and educated. Through its working papers, TUED provides high-quality research and analysis on a variety of issues connected to climate change and energy. NYSNA's "Lunch & Learn" programme for example breaks down TUED's analysis of energy transition politics and effectively relates their members' realities and lived experiences to broader social and political structures and injustices. Beyond education and training, strong coalitions with movement allies are key for a democratic energy future. The shift to a more democratic energy system can only happen when effective alliances are built and current divisions overcome.

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Endnotes:

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³ S. Sweeney, 'Contested Futures: Labor after Keystone XL'. *New Labor Forum*, 25(2), 2016

⁴ Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), *ATU & TWU Oppose Approval of the Keystone XL Pipeline and Call for End of Increased Use of Tar Sands Oil*, ATU website, online available from: <https://www.atu.org/media/releases/atu-twu-oppose-approval-of-the-keystone-xl-pipeline-and-call-for-end-of-increased-use-of-tar-sands-oil> [Accessed 25/04/2018]

Further Reading:

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2) N. Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, Allen Lane, London, 2014

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